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Tot pastant: A Woman's Life **Pilar V. Ratella**

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"TOT PASTANT": A WOMAN'S LIFE

PII.AR V. ROTELLA

"Spatial relations... are never innocent."

Anette KOLODNY

This paper undertakes a close reading of Víctor Català's short story "La jove" within a theoretical framework that focuses on the literary representation of space as a gendered phenomenon and of domestic chores as a (potential) source of woman's creativity and personal growth. In Víctor Català's story, *el pastador*, the room where la Beleta, "la jove"—the daughter-in-law of the title—spends a considerable amount of time kneading dough that will go to bake the family's bread, signifies both a place of literal enclosure and of symbolic liberation, as la Beleta routinely performs there her assigned task (baking bread) but also achieves a state of enlightened self-consciousness. "Tot pastant," "while kneading dough" (the story's subtitle), she learns to take initiative, to embrace generosity, and to face adversity, all converging in her role as bread-maker, the household's nurturing core.

Recently, there has been renewed interest in exploring the meaning of feminine spaces and woman-centered occupations. If "[h]ouses are the spatial context within which the social order is reproduced" (Spain 140), if certain rooms within the house have been traditionally assigned on the basis of gender, and if "throughout history and across cultures, architectural and geographic spatial arrangements have reinforced status differences between women and men" (Higonnet, Mapping 194), it is not surprising to find earlier writers already referring to and making use of specifically female spaces and activities as springboard for loftier reflections. In the 16th century, Santa Teresa de Avila found God among the kitchen pots and about a century later another nun, the Mexican Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, declared: "If Aristotle had been a cook, he would have written much more" (Trueblood 226). "[A]s Sor Juana astutely recognizes and her modern successors agree, the apparent limitation—women have no knowledge but knowledge of cooking—can be turned around: there is no knowledge that cannot be enriched by a knowledge of cooking" (Castillo 57). Similarly, Rosario Ferré has said: "I often confuse writing with cooking" (226). Increasingly, in modern times, women writers rely on everyday experiences (not only cooking but weaving, knitting, cleaning house, ironing clothes, and so on) to delve deeper into the female psyche and to explore philosophical

questions.¹ The very essence of "Housework" (her poem's title) becomes for Amanda Berenguer (of Uruguay) a transcendent metaphor of cosmic significance: "I brush the spider webs from the dismantled sky / with the same everyday utensil / I brush the obedient dust / off the regular objects [...] / I sweep the littered floor [...] / I sweep the earth" (Wieser 135).

Even at the theoretical level one can find texts such as Debra Castillo's *Talking Back: Toward a Latin American Feminist Literary Criticism* that display a striking "feminization of discourse." In the Preface and speaking of the relationship between herself and her mother-in-law, Castillo states: "For both of us, to some degree, the kitchen is the 'room of our own' Virginia Woolf recommends as essential to woman's spiritual advancement, the place where we write—or more often speak—our cooking secrets and our lives" (xiii). And she adds: "This book is something like a recipe, that is, an act of implied reciprocity" (xiv). Thus, Castillo significantly foregrounds not only gendered space but also its sororal implications, the way in which certain locations and activities link women psychologically and generationally. In the book's Conclusion (entitled "Sweeping Up"), Castillo includes a list of places that figure prominently in her preceding analysis of texts by Latin American women writers: Valenzuela's apartment cell, Ferré's brothel, Campos's sewing room, Lispector's maid room, Chávez's closet, etc. (293), a list to which Víctor Català's *pastador* could be easily attached, since it matches all these other spaces in terms of its privileged position as narrative locus. La Beleta and *el pastador* are inextricably connected as both objects and agents of meaning in the story. "La focalització interna de la dona es fa palesa pel marc espacial en que transcorre la seva vida [...]. La casa passa a ser l'espai femení per excel·lència en contraposició amb l'exterior, lloc emblemàtic del domini masculí. A més les ombres, la quietud i l'ordre d'aquests espais esdevenen el correlat simbòlic de la psicologia femenina" (Julià 267).

In "La jove" two narrative threads unfold simultaneously and their interweaving produces the final text-ture, the recognizable pattern into which all the story's elements are ultimately gathered. Through the narrator's voice, la Beleta's actions in a given day and

¹ Domesticity may be said to reach an apotheosis of sorts in Laura Esquivel's novel *Like Water for Chocolate*, where the protagonist, Tita, literally cooks her way through life and love, simultaneously engaging in three distinctive female activities: preparing food, writing about food (a cookbook), and knitting an immense bedspread. Tita asserts her personality, structures her life, and resolves her intimate conflicts as she carries out her household duties which she approaches constructively, creatively, and very much on her own terms. In a minor key, la Beleta echoes this approach by making *el pastador* the center of her domestic universe (as Tita does with the kitchen).

during a specific length of time (the time it takes her to get the bread ready for baking) and la Beleta's thoughts and feelings ranging freely over many years, emerge conjoined to provide both an account of her life and an insight into her soul. As Bachelard puts it, "[t]he minute we apply a glimmer of consciousness to a mechanical gesture, or practice phenomenology while polishing a piece of old furniture, we sense new impressions come into being beneath this familiar domestic duty" (67). "Tot pastant"—a mechanical gesture—la Beleta practices phenomenology (in her own way) as she evokes and appraises four crucial (if unintentional) discoveries that took place in *el pastador* and that, for better or worse, have shaped the course of her existence: the discovery of her father-in-law's "gran secret" (his hidden treasure), of her sister-in-law's shameful pregnancy, of her mother-in-law's fatal disease, and of her own husband's infidelity. These are all traumatic, potentially damaging revelations that threaten to destroy the family unit, not to mention la Beleta herself and her own self-esteem. Yet, in each case, unobserved but observant, she comes to grips with the situation and finds a positive resolution for the crisis; at the end, she appears hurt but still whole, wounded but still strong, distraught but resilient, thanks to the beneficent influence of *el pastador* and the constructive tasks she carries out within its confines.

El pastador is a spacious room, originally divided in two halves, one "enrajolada amb rajols antics, grollers i gruixuts com lloses de forn," the other "toscament empedrada amb palets de riera," a division that has remained even after the removal of "l'envà mitjancer" ("La jove" 891).² A single window offers the only source of light. In the morning the room is dark, gloomy, full of shadows, and it is precisely one fateful morning that la Beleta, without meaning to, unexpectedly sees her father-in-law digging in a corner, engaged in a mysterious and disconcerting activity. The father-in-law (repeatedly described as bad-tempered, stingy, selfish, "gasiu" [890], "sorrut i rancuniós" [896]) has hidden there the dowry brought him by his wife (repeatedly seen as her husband's victim: "Havia patit tant d'esperit en aquella casa!" [890]), fifty "unces d'or" (gold pieces) that disappeared forever in her marriage day, after she willingly deposited them in the bridegroom's hands. Significantly enough, la Beleta unravels the secret and dispels the mystery one sunny afternoon, when *el pastador* is full of light and facilitates the transition "de la paüra a l'encís" (893). La Beleta's "luminous" discovery benefits both her mother-in-law and her sister-in-law (897) seduced and abandoned by an outsider who turns out to be already married. The father-in-law being by then dead, his treasure is resourcefully used by la Beleta to help cover up

² All references are to "La jove" in Víctor Català's *Obres Completes*.

the young woman's predicament and, later on, to relieve her mother-in-law's suffering during her illness. La Beleta manages all this with tact, with discretion, "amb diplomàcia," "amb catxassa" (901), skillfully manipulating a distant but controlling husband who has inherited his father's worst characteristics ("era tan repropí de geni i tan interessat com el seu pare" [896]), a husband who has to be kept appeased but not necessarily informed.

La Beleta, her mother-in-law, and her sister-in-law appear connected by a shared, sustained effort at mutual support; the father-in-law and his son (La Beleta's husband) are portrayed as incapable of either individual generosity or communal effort. They are shown to be isolated and egotistical, a recurrent approach in Català's rural stories where marriage is consistently viewed as a form of oppression by the powerful (men) over the powerless (women).³ As if to underline the fundamental difference between male and female patterns of behavior, the same signifier changes meaning when applied to each gender. "El recó"/the corner, that "most sordid of all havens" (Bachelard 137), "l'amagatall negre" (891) where the old man selfishly conceals his poor wife's stolen dowry, becomes "el reconet de la cuina vora la llar apagada i sota la claror pàl·lida [. . .] del caputxí de llautó que hi havia en la lleixeta del faldar" (910), the "little corner," a secluded, welcoming space by the hearth where the women get together to seek comfort and make choices geared to preserve theirs and the family's integrity. La Beleta summarizes this gender-based difference when she refers to her husband and her father-in-law as "els altres" (906), thus transgressfully assigning to men the "otherness" more often associated with women.

What makes "La jove" particularly interesting is the way in which the writer, while clearly emphasizing the hardships and limitations of La Beleta's life, the obviously restrictive nature of her environment and her household duties, nevertheless presents them as satisfying, constructive, even liberating experiences. This is not unusual in Víctor Català. In the novel *Solitud*, for instance, we are told that, as la Mila, the main character, undertakes a thorough cleaning of the long-abandoned and disgustingly filthy hermitage where she will be living with her husband, she spends "deu o dotze dies en plena ubriaguesa de dona: netejava" (51). "La febre de la neteja l'havia presa tan follament, que sentia una excitació voluptuosa, entregant-se de ple an aquell gran tragí revolucionari" (52). Carried away by the physical and psychological excitement of "la neteja," of vigorously cleaning and

³ For a more detailed appraisal of Caterina Albert's/Víctor Català's views on marriage and women's lot, see my article "Naturalism, Regionalism, Feminism: The Rural Stories of Emilia Pardo Bazán and Caterina Albert i Paradís."

tidying up her new home, la Mila looks at her reflection and thinking "Que bonica sóc, així! [. . .] es besà a si mateixa [. . .]" (60). For Alvarado, la Mila displays "una certa autocomplaença i un tint narcisista" ("*Solitud*" 133), terms that, if not totally applicable to la Beleta, still convey to some extent a (lesser) degree of self-absorption and self-discovery.⁴ As with la Mila, the language used to describe what seems to be la Beleta's main occupation (*pastar*), not only raises it (and her) to a higher level, transforming drudgery into pleasure and routine into creative acts, but also underscores a kind of sensuality latent in housework.

Pastar is not easy: "[A la Beleta] la suor li anava regalant galtes avall, com si estigués sota un ruixat desfet i li hauria caigut sobre el pa si no se l'hagués tomat a cada punt amb el replec del braç" (897); she reaches a point when "fatigada i anhelosa, els ronyons li donaven l'alerta, obligant-la a reposar uns minuts per a redraçar l'esquena adolorida" (897). "I la mota creixia, creixia, creixia, creixia més i més... Ja amb prou feina la podia pendre d'un braçat [. . .]. No era estrany que li deixés els braços capolats i aquells ronyons tan adolorits" (905). *Pastar* is also a source of physical and emotional fulfillment expressed in the text through images that privilege the shapes and contours of the female body: "El panet de llevat, estufat i dur, d'una duresa flonja, tenia forma i turgències de pit de dona, i la Beleta sentia com una sensació agradable amoxant-lo i fent-lo saltar entre les seves mans" (889); "prèmer manyagament entre els seus braços ferrenys aquella gravidesa mòrbida produïa a la jove una càlida emoció voluptuosa" (897); "quan veié sobra la post aquella ringlera de pans, durs i turgents, mateix que pits de dona, obra de les seves mans [emphasis added] i tebis de la pròpia escalfor, experimentà una mena de voluptat apaivagadora i reconfortant" (909). Korman sees "focus on the curved form, reminiscent of the womb and, therefore, of a particularly sororal space, as central to women's conceptualization and actualization of their spatial context" (90), a process clearly rendered in "La jove" through the recurrent linking of *bread* and *breast*. Both la Mila in *Solitud* and la Beleta in "La jove" prove that woman's circumscribed activity in confining spaces may nevertheless transcend their oppressiveness, "pot provocar-li fins i tot una excitació voluptuosa" and result in "[una] exploració de la seva sensualitat/sexualitat a través de la metàfora i l'al·legoria" (Alvarado, "Caterina Albert" 38).⁵

⁴ I have studied la Mila's character and *Solitud* in an essay entitled "Women Alone."

⁵ Anne Charlon believes that "aquesta sensualitat sense homes podria sostenir la tesi de l'homosexualitat de Víctor Català" (48), but she refuses to enter the "debate" on this issue. For Charlon the whole episode of la Mila's housecleaning is "[una] 'oda a la neteja,' un himne al treball femení" (48) and highlights Català's consistent portrayal of men as generally unproductive and of women as active and useful.

However, there is another, deeper, more spiritual dimension also attached to la Beleta's experience in *el pastador*. After her last and most personally distressing discovery—that her husband married her out of spite and has been unfaithful to her with “la veïna del devant,” who was his first love—la Beleta, though shaken and changed forever (“De repent, havia envellit de vint anys, i [. . .] d'aquella data enllà, mai més seria altra” [909]), achieves a humble but illuminating epiphany upon realizing that “per bé i per mal, tot quant restava de viu en la seva persona estaria vinculat per arreu al pastador; an aquell ombrívol i misteriós pastador, *sagrari* [emphasis added] d'estranyes facècies” (909). The use of “sagrari” (sanctuary, shrine) here defies the more traditional assumption that “[i]n general, man is sacred, woman is profane” (Higonnet, *New Cartographies* 3) and asserts la Beleta's agency over her immediate surroundings, over *el pastador*, a secular space turned sacred by woman's work and woman's suffering. If—again in Bachelard's words—“it makes sense that we ‘write a room,’ ‘read a room,’ or ‘read a house,’” (14), reading *el pastador* is understanding la Beleta's life, a woman's life made of hard work, sacrifices, and renunciations, but also ennobled by concern for other sufferers (other women) and enriched by a willing engagement with and personal satisfaction in one's own achievements, modest as they may be. As la Beleta herself puts it: “Era una feina realment plaent, la de pastar; ella no se n'havia cansat mai, per pans que hagués de fer, i per molt que costés de fer-los pujar” (889). Higonnet speaks of how “women novelists [. . .] turn to a feminized architecture in order to represent the domestic arena inhabited by their protagonists. Round houses, baskets, and even beds may signify alternatively confinement or the possibility of self-definition” (*New Cartographies* 9). La Beleta's bread, shaped by her own hands into feminine roundness, appears to signify both restriction and liberation, a source of never-ending work but also an avenue for creativity, reflection, and maturation.

Close reading of “La jove” demonstrates what I have elsewhere called Víctor Català's “latent feminism” and exemplifies the contrast between her life—that of a typical upper class *senyoreta*, all restraint and discretion—and her writing, particularly the rural stories with their thorough, pitiless “escorcollament de l'univers femení” (Alvarado, Caterina 29). Though Víctor Català never openly participated in the incipient feminist movement of her times, she addressed its issues and concerns in her writing, explicitly revealing the dismal conditions of many women's lives and implicitly acknowledging the need for change and reform.⁶ “La jove” follows along these lines, but,

⁶ Víctor Català comes closest to stating her views on women's rights in the speech

unlike most of the stories under the collective title of *Drames rurals*, it takes a more positive turn by foregrounding self-reliance and gender-based solidarity as ways of coping with and even transcending adversity. La Beleta in her *pastador* struggles and suffers, but also lives and learns, learns to live and make the most of the ordinary, often distressing, yet paradoxically rewarding experiences that mark a woman's life.

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